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Facing Internal Unrest, UJC Takes Flak From Insider Blog

Federation Heads Meeting To Discuss Future of Troubled Umbrella Group

By Anthony Weiss

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The national alliance of Jewish federated philanthropies once again came under fire this week, as the agency's chief executive prepared for a meeting in New York with the heads of the biggest local Jewish charities.

The gathering comes as United Jewish Communities, the charities' national coordinating body, announced the departure of another senior staffer last week, the fourth in the past year. Adding to the tension, an anonymous, apparently insider blog has begun to attract attention among leaders nationwide, airing charges of UJC indirection and low staff morale.

UJC has been criticized as ineffective and inefficient almost since its formation in 1999 through a merger of three predecessor agencies, the United Jewish Appeal, United Israel Appeal and Council of Jewish Federations. UJC's current president and CEO, Howard Rieger, has attempted, since taking office in 2005, to restructure and streamline the agency, but his tenure has been marked by turmoil. A number of senior professionals have left UJC since Rieger's arrival; the local Detroit federation is in rebellion over its dues to UJC, and several other federations have protested the dues formula. Meanwhile, the annual fundraising campaign has stagnated, and allocations to overseas beneficiaries, the charities' signature cause, have been dropping.

The organization has also been accused of being closed and resistant to criticism. Now, however, long-rumored internal complaints are being aired in the new blog.

"Notwithstanding the hopes of the federation system and the merging organizations that created United Jewish Communities in 1999, any fair review of its 'accomplishments' since its founding would have to conclude that UJC has been a costly bust," said the opening post to the blog, which calls itself Disunited Jewish Communities. "What UJC is today is nothing more than a stumbling bureaucracy that can't get out of its own way."

UJC national chairman Joe Kanfer said he had not seen the blog, but he dismissed its criticisms as an insignificant voice in a large and changing organization.

"People do not love change," Kanfer told the Forward. Within UJC, he said, "there's a change afoot, which is very purposeful and very strategic."

That change now includes the departure of Gail Reiss, who helped run the annual campaign. She is leaving to work for UJA-Federation of New York. Reiss's boss, Victoria Agron, also recently left the

organization. Reiss could not be reached for comment.

Although lay and professional leaders agreed it was appropriate for Rieger to assemble a staff he was comfortable with, some worried that he was driving out valuable, experienced professionals.

"I think we've lost an enormous amount of history and credibility within the communities," said Robert Cutler, a former UJC board member. Cutler said he was unfamiliar with the circumstances of Reiss's departure, but he had been troubled to see dedicated and talented professionals demeaned, marginalized and driven to leave.

Even leaders supportive of Rieger fretted that continuing senior staff departures could hurt UJC's image.

"I'm concerned about the perception that it creates," said UJA Federation of Greater Toronto's president, Ted Sokolsky, who is chairing the upcoming executives' meeting. "I know that the perception of so many senior people leaving — that's a challenge that has to be addressed; there's no question about it."

Kanfer said the departing professionals had been replaced with equal talent and that he saw nothing unusual in the turnover.

Low staff morale is a major focus of Disunited Jewish Communities, active since early last December. The blog, written in a strident tone and rife with typographical errors, discusses several topics, especially criticisms of UJC's work environment.

The blog does not identify contributors, but sources familiar with UJC's inner workings told the Forward that some details — including staff nicknames and descriptions of intra-office banter — suggested intimate knowledge of the organization.

One entry, posted before Reiss's departure was announced, discussed recent staff departures and claimed that experienced professionals had been humiliated and shunted aside. Another post described a "Great Places To Work Survey" taken by UJC, which then failed to release the results.

"Those of us inside the organization didn't need a Survey to know that morale has never been lower, that more resumes are in circulation 'on the street' than ever before, and that UJC's top professional leadership wants no data that would conflict with their perception that everyone at UJC is happy, happy, happy," wrote the contributor, identified as "UJC Boys/Girls."

Kanfer said the survey results had arrived only recently. He said UJC's willingness to conduct the survey was a sign of openness, but that it was not yet decided whether to release the results.

Staff changes are a likely topic at the meeting between Rieger and the big-city executives. Some executives described the meeting as an opportunity to be more assertive about how UJC is run.

"There will be discussion about management and operational issues at UJC," an executive close to the discussions said. "What that means is a time for some of the executives to step in and to take a more active role in the management of the organization — look at the budget, review the budget, see where and how changes can be made and refocus the organization."

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